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AN ITALIAN MODERNIST'S HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

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The religious propaganda carried on in Italy by the Protestant churches has not, we must confess, yielded the results they presumably hoped for. It is not that they have achieved no practical result. Doubtless they have done good to scattered groups of believers. But the result has had no national importance. It has not been felt as a vital force in the world of Italian culture, nor as creating a spring of living, genuine religious feeling such as could exercise a noticeable influence on the further development of the religious consciousness of the country.

Nor have attempts at a religious revival originating within the country itself been more successful. The movements in favor of Liberal Catholicism, Christian Democracy, Modernism, important and vigorous as they were, seem to have passed by and to be over. They have left hardly any trace of having existed; in a sense the fact of their non-success has left matters rather worse than before.

Perhaps until now it has never been sufficiently realized how difficult is this question of a religious revival in Italy; the keenest observers have overlooked the difficulties. The saying of Erasmus, "*Itali omnes athei*," is just as true, and as false, as it was at the time of the Renaissance. But we might with almost equal truth say, "*Itali omnes clerici*." No modern nation has had less of an inner religious life; and yet no modern people has a civil history so closely bound up with its religious

history. The civil history of Italy centres round the papacy; Italy was always either obeying or resisting her popes. While she obeyed them, she was also occupied in judging and criticising; we need only recall, among others, the names of Dante, Petrarch, and Savonarola. When she was fighting the papacy, she yet in her heart of hearts respected and loved it, only wishing to see it improved. To this rule there are only trifling exceptions; the papacy was felt to be an entirely Italian institution.

To put the matter in other words, the Italians have never viewed religion as a personal inner relationship between man and God; of this they have not been capable. They have never taken any real interest in efforts on behalf of religion when these seemed to them to be only of a limited and local kind. The idea of religion for them involves universality; its spirit must find a historical expression in symbols, ceremonies, and some instituted form of ecclesiastical authority.

We are not mentioning this as a point in their favor. No; we are fully conscious that it is this fact that has been a tremendous drawback in the national life. Owing to it, our country has been left behind in religious progress, to rank with Spain and Greece in this respect. Religious institutions, whatever they may become in the future, had to pass, after the Middle Ages, through a period of criticism, of inner development, of individualism and non-conformity. Italy has not yet definitely reached this period of development. The papacy is still strong enough today to maintain its position; it holds its own in spite of the vapid indifferentism which surrounds it. The most thankless task, the most wearisome and ill-fated, is that of trying to interest our fellow-countrymen in the problems of their moral and religious faith. Our appeal is everywhere met by that hypocritical spirit of opposition which is to be found all over Italy.

Will the war alter all this? If the truth must be told, we are bound to admit that, at least so far, the war has not stirred the hearts of the Italians to their depths, as it has in the other countries engaged. No; from first to last, the only noticeable feature has been the Catholic revival. It has been accompanied by the presence and the pomp of its chaplains and by an æsthetic form of mysticism of a Catholic type, whose high priest, Gabriele D'Annunzio, has hitherto been a writer of the fleshly school.

But the Italians are partly old in scepticism, partly ingenuous as children; and most of them have not as yet fully grasped the tragic gravity of the war upon which they have — so justly — entered. They are only beginning to realize the extent of the sacrifices it involves. They will not have learnt spiritual wisdom for some time yet; for they have still to meditate upon all the historical reasons for the war and to feel the burdens of those new and arduous duties that it brings.

But some change is beginning to make itself felt in rather less profound regions of thought. Our public life of yesterday, for instance, near as it is and far away as it already seems, is remembered by some with a keen sense of repulsion. They do not know what it will be tomorrow; they feel it cannot be as it was yesterday. And another sign of the times is that others — even those who were yesterday the most ardent upholders of external forms of civilization, those who fought for some cause connected with material progress — are now speaking of moral energies, spiritual values, and of faith. Much is also to be hoped from the present return to the living traditions of our nation, the liberation, that is, from foreign, and especially from German, influences, which have been with us too long, and marred our national genius.

At the end of the war there will therefore in all probability be an excellent opportunity, but a brief and fleeting one, for attempts at a national religious revival that may be lasting.

But we shall have to keep clear of the errors of the past. We shall still have to face the Italian instinctive dislike of narrow religious movements and small religious bodies. This feeling is too deeply rooted in our national culture for it to disappear altogether. Italian Catholics will still cling to the forms and symbols of their Church—that which comprises so much that is human history and at the same time is a compendium of so much of our national history. There will be no interest or attraction for cultured Italians in a movement where they find no germ of a new spiritual and religious synthesis such as may embrace all humanity while including and absorbing the religious forms of the past. The last great Italian in whom we have the expression of Italian religious feeling was, though he stood outside the older Churches, Giuseppe Mazzini, preacher of a God whose worshippers have still to be found. It is we who were the first to call for a return to his faith, proclaiming him not as a republican or a conspirator or a patriot, but as a soul deeply, intensely imbued with the religious spirit.

For the future, therefore, I see only two possible forms of practical religious effort. The first is a liberal form of Catholicism, which while it would be excommunicated by the Pope, would not respond by excommunicating him; while not actually denying anything in the old Catholicism, it would permit of its free development. This is the Modernist idea as it has existed from the time of Lambruschini and Gioberti down to today. The second form would be a religious movement for cultured minds, and would judge of things strictly by their essential spiritual value. It would be Unitarian, and,

not so much because it tended to polemics as because it would keep an open mind, its attitude would be critical.

Educative as regards spiritual liberty, it would be able to embrace all forms of faith by rising above them to a new synthesis; from this point of view, such forms are seen to be stepping-stones, stages, means of development in one great faith, a faith which accepts the idea of the unity of the world, and of the world's history under the guidance of God, and takes its stand on the spiritual value of things.

If the Italians are more inclined, after the war, to accept both of these movements, they will find that they have not strength to carry them out. Individual initiative is as yet too weak; it hardly exists as far as religious subjects are concerned. The coalition against the innovators is also too strong.

As regards culture and the religious studies which would be necessary to prepare any religious revival, students are lacking. Against similar studies the Church sets her face; and the State, being afraid of getting wrong with theology, has suppressed every kind of scientific teaching of philosophy, or of the history of religion, in the lycées and universities.

This state of things, the tendency of Italians to seek religious satisfaction in those forms which have historic or cultural and universal importance and value, ought to induce other nations in whom the religious sense is keener, to interest themselves more and with increased judgment and discernment, in the state of religious thought in Italy. We ought to provide ourselves with all that is necessary to make war on mediæval ecclesiasticism in Rome, the centre of this religious thought. As far as one can see, Rome is intended to be the seat of a new spirit of universal religion which shall take the place of the old, and have the power to assert itself and

triumph over the present mechanical, formal civilization. The first thing to be done is to provide books, lectures, and clubs of religious culture, and if it were possible, to found a free university of religious studies in Rome. All these things would lead Italians to value that spirit of liberty which should be the foundation and the guiding rule of all research and of all true religious life. The scientific study of religion ought to be revived in Italy. We ought to get into touch with the more living centres of religious activity, specially in England and America.

These are the main lines of our programme. On these lines we hope to work when the war is over. But this can only be done as far as we are enabled to do so by the help and collaboration we find in other countries outside Italy.